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The Coming of Yale
College to New Haven

Williston Walker



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THE COMING OF YALE COLLEGE TO NEW HAVEN

AN HISTORICAL ADDRESS AT THE
COMMEMORATION OF THE
TWO HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE REMOVAL
OF THE COLLEGIATE SCHOOL OF CON-
NECTICUT TO NEW HAVEN
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BY
PROFESSOR WILLISTON WALKER
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THE COMING OF YALE COLLEGE TO NEW HAVEN

BY WILLISTON WALKER

NO commemoration could be more significant in the civic and intellectual life of our community than that in which we engage today. The city and the University which now celebrate two completed centuries of helpful association, alike rejoice in this long relationship, and each felicitates the other that a union which has been productive of such advantages in the past, is so cherished in the present, and so auspicious for the future. It is the privilege of the present speaker to recall briefly some of the circumstances which brought New Haven and Yale into this inseparable relationship, not without struggle and overcoming of obstacles that seemed at times to imperil what we all now regard as a cardinal achievement in our city's history.

Gathered in this chapel this morning, it requires a tremendous effort of the imagination to picture the New Haven and the Yale of two centuries ago. The Green, then an almost treeless and unfenced expanse, was at once the market place, the seat of the one house of worship, the site of the prison, and the common burial ground of the community. Around it, or stretching from it in a ragged line to the harbor, were the low wooden houses, sheltering a village of less than a thousand inhabitants. Agriculture was the prevailing interest, though commerce was represented by a few small vessels trading with Boston and New York and occasionally venturing to the West Indies. New Haven was small, remote from the great stream of the world's life, a petty town in a little colony, of scanty resources in all save men of character and ambition. These men were far-seeing enough to determine that New Haven

should have a College, and fortunate enough to bring that determination to practical fruition two hundred years ago.

The dream of a College in New Haven was a vision which had early risen before the minds of the founders. Rev. John Davenport, its chief spiritual leader, had urged such a foundation, probably as early as 1645, when New Haven was but in its infancy, in words prophetic of what Yale was to be, though used in this instance regarding the free school which was the immediate object of discussion. He would have a College: "for the better trayning upp of youth in this town, that through God's blessing, they may be fitted for publike service hereafter, either in church or commonweale." Nor was Davenport without support in this endeavor. The town of New Haven, as early as 1648, set aside land on what is now Elm Street, near the present Temple Street, as a site for the desired seat of learning. Four years later, endeavors were made to enlist the aid of the other towns of the little New Haven Colony in the undertaking. In 1655, the General Court of the New Haven commonwealth had reason to believe that New Haven, besides its promised land, would contribute £300 for the foundation of a College, and that the other towns of the New Haven jurisdiction would raise the sum to £540. A few months later, Davenport was soliciting the assistance of that generous friend of education, Governor Edward Hopkins, of the Connecticut Colony, then returned to England,—a man to whose liberality this community owes its venerable and useful Grammar School. Certainly New Haven's desire for a College was strong from the beginning of the colony, and its leading men were laboring to bring their vision to realization.

All these early hopes were dashed, however, by the crisis in the economic and political fortunes of New Haven which came to a head in the seventh decade of the seventeenth century. Beyond any other New England colony, it was the fortune of New Haven to be tested by disappointment and disaster. Begun largely by London people, of business training and commercial rather than agricultural ambi-

tions, it was the hope of the founders to plant here a trading and manufacturing community. To this ambition we owe the four-square planning of the older center of the city, and its notable Green, designed as a market place and for the gathering of assemblies. New Haven was in due time to become what the founders wished. It was to have its manufactures and its trade in abundance; but that could not be till long after the wilderness had been subdued and the forests of New England and New York had given place to civilized life.

The founders speedily discovered that their hopes of a commercial emporium were vain. The loss of the large vessel that they had had freighted for England with such wares as they could muster in 1646,—the so-called Phantom Ship,—was a staggering industrial blow. Matters commercial went from bad to worse. Then came the Stuart Restoration, in 1660, and with it an unfavorable change in attitude on the part of the English rulers towards the colony, culminating in the union of New Haven with Connecticut, accomplished in 1665. However necessary and fruitful for good that association now appears to us, it was bitterly resented by our New Haven predecessors at the time. It was regarded as a final blow to their cherished plans, and it led, three years later, to the departure from New Haven of John Davenport. A sober, weakened community was left, and the ambitious thought of a College passed away, for the time, with a fading of so many other hopes that had shone brightly in more prosperous days.

Yet, though cast down, New Haven was not destroyed. It gradually grew in strength. With the coming of young James Pierpont, in 1684, to the pastorate of its only church, it had once more a spiritual leader of civic and intellectual vision. Important as were to be his services in the founding of Yale, no one man could do the work alone. Other leaders of the colony sympathized. The advice of certain men prominent in Massachusetts, and more or less critical of existing tendencies at Harvard, was sought. The first session of the legislature in New Haven, as one of the two

capitals of the colony, was deemed an appropriate occasion to solicit governmental approval; and thus the College came into being in October, 1701. The wish of the founders of New Haven was at last realized in part, at least. The College was a reality, though it was not yet established in New Haven.

That settlement in this city was only to be the result of a long controversy and of much effort on the part of those who favored New Haven as the site of the College. At their first meeting, on November 11, 1701, the Trustees of the newly constituted institution determined on Saybrook as its location. The reasons for this decision are not recorded beyond the consideration "that so all parts of Connecticut Colony with the neighboring Colony may be best accommodated"; but the conjecture is natural that the selection was a compromise. The Connecticut river was still a usual route of travel. Saybrook was at its mouth, and accessible to those who came by water from the towns which looked to Hartford as their natural center and from those of western Massachusetts; while it could be reached easily from those stretching along the coast from Stamford to New London. Aside from this centrality of location for a collegiate enterprise that now included all the Colony of Connecticut, Saybrook had, however, little to offer; and the business superiority of New Haven, from the first, was attested by the choice, from 1702 onward, when a Saybrook man resigned or failed to qualify, of residents of New Haven as treasurers of the growing enterprise.

Saybrook, also, proved unsatisfactory from a scholastic point of view. The first Rector, or President, of the College, Rev. Abraham Pierson, of what was then known as Killingworth, but is now our neighboring town of Clinton, could not be persuaded to remove thither from his comfortable parish, and, till his death, in March, 1707, the College was housed under his hospitable roof, in spite of the constant objections of his parishioners that the care of students was robbing them of pastoral services justly their due. On the demise of the first Rector, Rev. Samuel Andrew of Mil-

ford was chosen his successor,—an appointment apparently intentionally temporary, though it was to continue till 1719. Some students had their training under the new Rector, who did not leave his Milford parish save for Commencements in Saybrook. Others studied in Saybrook under successive tutors. The College lacked any adequate building that it could call its home. So matters drifted along in a thoroughly unsatisfactory condition.

The College, however, was securing important friends. Aroused by the vigorous James Pierpont, Trustee, and minister in New Haven, the indefatigable Jeremy Dummer, who had become the London agent of Connecticut in 1712, was soliciting gifts in England, the first results of which were received in 1714, in the shape of a Library of more than seven hundred well-chosen volumes. This gift brought to fresh consideration the question of a suitable building for the College, and unsuccessful attempts were made to secure an appropriation from the legislature in October, 1714, and May, 1715, for the erection of such a structure in Saybrook. The problem of adequate provision for the College was evidently becoming more apparent to the public consciousness.

Meanwhile there had appeared an unexpected prospect of funds in the colonial treasury. The protracted dispute with Massachusetts as to the northern boundary of Connecticut had resulted in a new survey, by which Massachusetts' encroachments had been demonstrated, and that reluctant colony was about to compensate Connecticut by equivalent lands. At its session in October, 1715, the Connecticut legislature therefore ordered that, from the amount to come from the sale of these lands, £500 should be appropriated for a suitable building for the College. With the means in prospect, at least to begin the work, the question of the site of the College now became immediately acute. It was now embittered by the fact that, though the existing Saybrook location aroused wide criticism, and nowhere more than in the student body itself, Hartford was vigorously awaking, under the leadership of the ministers of its

two older churches, both Trustees of the College, Timothy Woodbridge and Thomas Buckingham, to the possibility of having the College located in its vicinity. Already a considerable portion of the students had gathered in Wethersfield, and were enjoying the unauthorized teaching of a young Harvard graduate, Elisha Williams, who, ten years later, was to become the ablest of the early presidents of Yale. The question of location had now become a three-cornered fight, in which Saybrook, Hartford, and New Haven each had its partisans; and New Haven had lost one of its strongest supporters through the death, in November, 1714, of its minister-trustee, Rev. James Pierpont.

Each of the three parties now appealed to its public for subscriptions. The friends of Saybrook were able to secure pledges of £1200 to £1400. Hartford was more ready with claims and protestations than with promises of cash; while New Haven and its vicinity largely contributed to the ultimate decision by a prospect of gifts totalling from £1500 to £2000, and grants of land. Under these circumstances, the corporation of the College, met in Saybrook on September 12, 1716, voted five to two that, if a change of location should be made, New Haven was more desirable than Hartford. Assembled again in New Haven, on October 17, 1716, it voted, in the same numbers, in favor of the permanent establishment of the College in New Haven. From that decision the Corporation never receded; and it constitutes the event which we commemorate today.

Though the Corporation had settled upon New Haven, the struggle was by no means closed. The Hartford town-meeting in December, 1716, instructed its representatives in the legislature to protest against the New Haven location and to ask that body to fix the site. It had something to say for its contention, for, since the founding of the College, a majority of its students had come from Hartford and New London counties. Meanwhile, the rival school in Wethersfield continued, and may even be said to have flourished. The event proved, however, that the decision had been made. A lot was bought by the Corporation in

September, 1717, about an acre and a quarter in extent, where Osborn Hall now stands, as a site for the College building. The purchase was made from the New Haven church, now the Center Church, and the price was so nominal as to amount to a donation.

Hartford still objected. While the commencement of 1717 saw four graduates at New Haven, a degree was conferred on a similar candidate on a parallel occasion under the presidency of the Hartford Trustee, Rev. Timothy Woodbridge, in Wethersfield. The New Haven party had won a strong supporter, however, in the person of the forceful, dominant governor, Gurdon Saltonstall of New London, the only man in Connecticut history ever translated directly from the pulpit to the office of chief executive. His aid was soon potent. Nor was the Corporation neglecting the advantages which come from possession. A building committee had been appointed in 1716. Governor Saltonstall had been asked to aid in the architectural plans, and, on October 8, 1717,—only twelve days after the completion of the purchase of the site,—the frame of the building was raised under the supervision of Henry Caner, who had been summoned from Boston as head-carpenter. Certainly, once New Haven had been determined upon, there was no unnecessary delay.

It was well that building was in progress, for, under the influence of protests by the friends of Hartford, the Corporation was summoned by the legislature to justify its action six days after the frame of the collegiate building had been raised. Both sides presented memorials advocating their claims. The lower house proposed to "split the difference" by fixing upon Middletown as the site of the College. The upper house, under the sway of Governor Saltonstall, held that the Corporation had power to decide the location. A joint debate of the contestants was now held, on October 26, 1717, before both houses of the General Assembly, as a result of which the lower house changed its attitude, and by a vote of thirty-six to thirty concurred in the New Haven site. Yet the fight was not over; for at the

session of May, 1718, the scarcely convinced lower house voted that the appropriation granted from the colonial treasury be divided in proportion to the number of their students between instructors in Wethersfield, Saybrook and New Haven, and that commencements be held alternately in Wethersfield and New Haven. The disapproval of the upper house prevented this compromise recommendation from becoming a law. Yet the Wethersfield rival school continued, and five of the thirteen graduates of 1718 there received their degrees.

Meanwhile an event had occurred which not only confirmed all that had thus far been done in New Haven, but was to give a name to the infant College. In January, 1718, a persuasive letter written by Rev. Cotton Mather of Boston, perhaps instigated from Connecticut, but probably on his own initiative, had gone to Governor Elihu Yale in London, bespeaking his assistance. The career of that chief early benefactor of the College is familiar. Born in New England, and connected with New Haven, he had made a fortune in India, and won the title of Governor of Madras. Since 1699, he had been living in retirement in England. He had already shown his interest in the infant College by a gift of books, secured by Jeremy Dummer, in 1713. Dummer now added personal entreaties to Mather's letter. Yale's response was prompt, if not excessive in view of his large fortune. At the Commencement of 1718, announcement was made that, in addition to a portrait of King George I, and a collection of books, there had been received from him in Boston a quantity of goods of value. When sold later, they realized £562/12. Thus established, at least in prospect, the name Yale College was given to the building which was the center of so many New Haven hopes. It became, at the same time, the designation of the whole institution.

By October, 1718, Yale College was ready for occupancy. A strange-looking structure it must have been, yet not without a certain stateliness as became the most elaborate edifice of which New Haven, two hundred years ago, could boast.

About one hundred and seventy feet in length, it was only twenty-two feet broad, and its three stories were crowned with a high-pitched roof. Within was a combined dining hall and chapel, a library room, and quarters for sixty-six students. A kitchen projected from the side, prolonging the building towards the rear.

The legislature, at its autumn session in 1718, sought to heal ill feelings engendered by the strife as to location. £50 were voted as an aid to public instruction in Saybrook, and £500 for the erection of a State House in Hartford,—not the only time in Connecticut history that Hartford has experienced the satisfaction of a generous provision for housing the authorities of the commonwealth. Yet these donations had not the desired soothing effect. Saybrook forcibly resisted the removal of such portion of the College library as had been there housed and only a damaged part was secured by the aid of the county sheriff. The resistance of the disaffected Hartford element was more ambitious. That town chose as its representatives to the legislature of 1719 its two disaffected trustees, the pastors of its two older churches, Timothy Woodbridge and Thomas Buckingham. The opponents of the New Haven location of the College, in Hartford and elsewhere, attempted the defeat of Saltonstall for governor, thus to terminate the influential support that he had given to New Haven's claims. It was in vain. Saltonstall was triumphantly reëlected, while Woodbridge was faced by charges of defamation of the governor and council before the lower house. The contest was over. New Haven was permanently in possession of Yale.

From the beginning of its settlement here Yale College became an important factor in New Haven life. Indeed, it may be questioned whether its numerical impact on the community was not greater, as far as the student body is concerned, than at present. To equal the proportion of about sixty students in a village of possibly a thousand inhabitants, such as obtained very speedily after Yale was established in New Haven, the student body of today, as estimated on the present basis of population in this city,

would have to number nearly nine thousand members. Influence is not to be weighed in numbers, but such a calculation has at least the significance that Yale, from the first, had its weighty share in this community, if regarded merely from the numerical point of view.

Numbers are, however, the least of the factors which Yale has contributed to New Haven life. It has been worth infinitely much to this community that, added to its business enterprise, and to all the forces that have made so steadily for its material advancement, it has been for two centuries a center of strenuous intellectual life. Such a presence as that of Yale in New Haven has rendered the name of the city known, in other connections than those of commerce and manufacture, not merely throughout the country, but throughout the world. It has given the city a zest and a flavor of life unusual among municipalities on this continent. It has made New Haven a more delightful place in which to live. It has attracted here men of learning and of intellectual tastes whom the city has been glad to welcome. It has helped many a son of New Haven on the path to conspicuous "Publick employment," as the original charter of Yale puts it, "both in Church & Civil State."

While New Haven has, therefore, never been unmindful of the advantages which the fathers sought in struggling, as we have seen, for the location of Yale in this city, and Yale, in its turn, has reason to be profoundly grateful for two centuries of New Haven's civic hospitality, it is pleasant to observe that the relations between the city and its chief institution of learning were never more cordial than at the present. This noble civic and academic celebration, in which all elements of our common municipal life have a share, is sufficient evidence of mutual regard, and of pride in a common heritage. Yet while New Haven has always had occasion to feel satisfaction in the event of two centuries ago, the relations of town and University have not always been as cordial as they now are. The attitude of the College in the religious discussions which distracted this

community in the eighteenth century was not one that commended it to all our citizens. Its political and religious conservatism caused some friction in the early years of the nineteenth century. Sixty years ago, town and gown disputes, now almost inconceivable, more than once disturbed the peace of our streets. The contrast between the scholastic and the commercial ideals of life has sometimes been more sharply drawn than is wise or just. Yet these have been but the relatively slight asperities of associates, the city and the University, that have been really indispensable to each other. It is a satisfaction to note that these illustrations have to be drawn from ancient story. The recent history of Yale and of New Haven has been one of constant increase of good feeling, of mutual helpfulness and of pride in each other's achievements. Never were Yale and New Haven more at one than they are today.

So today as we commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the settlement of Yale in New Haven, it is with gratitude toward those who in the days of small things made this union possible. They had their abundant perplexities, their contests, their discouragements. But they had, also, an unconquerable faith, and a courage adequate to their needs. They builded well, and we have entered into the fruit of their labors. Nor can we forget the noble succession which for two centuries, in city and in University, has carried on their work, building fairer and nobler year by year, till we have the New Haven and the Yale in which we now rejoice. What the future may have in store none may know; but of this we may be assured, that Yale and New Haven will continue in inseparable connection, in growing helpfulness each to other, and in increasing appreciation of the common advantages of their association. May the memories of the last two hundred years be perpetuated and strengthened in the association and growth of Yale and New Haven for generations to come!

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